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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: JUNE 2013

A GIFT

I was reading a story from Bulgakov's *A Country Doctor's Notebook* last night, titled *The Embroidered Towel*. The stories in this collection are all somewhat autobiographical. Bulgakov was sent to a remote, yet well-provisioned, hospital immediately after graduating from medical school.

The Embroidered Towel is about a farmer's daughter who is maimed in a threshing machine. The doctor (Bulgakov) is new, inexperienced and very unsure of himself. When the farmer brings his daughter to the hospital, she has bled out over six miles of nearly impassible roads. Nobody in the hospital thinks she'll make it. The doctor only hopes that she dies in the ward, not on the operating table. The father is distraught in the adjacent room.

The being lying before the medics is now closer now to meat than a person. She doesn't even bleed anymore. The doctor stops worrying about himself. He just does what seems right, relying on common sense more than anything. To the amazement of everyone, the daughter doesn't die. When they lift her to the ward, one third of her body stays on the operating table. Yet, she makes it.

The young girl embroiders a hand-towel, "artlessly", with a red cockerel as a thank-you gift for the doctor, who is too young to have the humility to accept it immediately. Bulgakov/The Doctor finally does accept it, nervously, at the insistence of her father. He uses the towel until it falls apart.

This is not a story about how a young man develops a doctor's god-like self confidence. This is a story about how an educated man learns what is really important; how he gets over himself and learns humility. He drops his cosmopolitan pretensions and sees beauty where he doesn't expect to: in the flock he's been sent to shepherd.

I guess that this post is about being a good shepherd.

Bulgakov uses the same 'misdirection' tricks that Roald Dahl uses, I've written about those tricks here. For most of *The Embroidered Towel*, you'll think the story is about how metro-man deals with the unsympathetic hicks around him. Instead, the doctor grows himself. (Natural ending, twisted to natural, smart ending.) Bulgakov throws a 'golden apple' in front of the reader: his dread of being presented with a hernia, which is something he feel singularly unable to cope with.

The character of The Doctor/Bulgakov is initially adversarial to every other character: his driver, the head nurse, his first patient. He has no patience, just an overriding fear of failure and a lot of pride. By the end of the story, it's clear that the locals, for all their provincialism, have more wisdom and grace than the young doctor. However, *The Embroidered Towel* does not have a soul-deadening ending because the doctor begins to learn that grace himself.

Dahl wrote satire. Bulgakov wrote satire. They were both angry men. But Dahl's writing has an impish wickedness. It revels in a kind of cosmopolitan darkness. There's very little hope in Dahl's writing (at least for adults), there's just dark, sinister laughter. I imagine Dahl crawling out of his writing-shack after work and making a bee-line to the booze cabinet. *Now that we've written it down, let us wash it away.*

Bulgakov's writing, on the other hand, is filled with sad laughter rather than spiteful laughter. His satire could be absolutely eviscerating, but it is delivered in a spirit of 'tough love' rather than mockery or despair. That's why it's invigorating, rather than perpetuating a feeling of hopelessness.

Dahl wrote for the applause; Bulgakov wrote because he couldn't stand by and not say anything. That doesn't mean that Bulgakov was a saint– in fact, Bulgakov sounds like he was a very difficult man– but it does mean that deep down he had love for the people around him.

Bulgakov was not a Dahl, nor a Boothe-Luce, nor a Stephenson. A good shepherd doesn't have contempt for his sheep. He can recognize their weaknesses, he can get exasperated, but he never has contempt for them, because he knows that his fate is inexorably tied to theirs. At the end of the day, a good shepherd lives for his sheep, and doesn't want to waste the sacrifices his sheep make.

Dahl, on the other hand, just wanted to shear people for the next goodie– then *hide*.

God help us all if a spirit like Dahl's becomes a prerequisite for government service. And I hope that I never want to drink after I write.

LEAVE A COMMENT

CHARACTER MATTERS

Angelina: Behind the Blow

I've watched more than my fair share of children's cartoons. There is a real shortage of heroes. I don't mean characters with special powers, I mean characters who show kids *how to be* heroic. The last real hero I can think of is Mrs. Brisby from *The Secret of NIMH*, which was a looong time ago.

Instead of heroes, kids are fed pseudo-heroes. Take for instance, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*: a princess-wannabe who is many times more narcissistic than the arch-villain Gaston. *Did nobody in Burbank notice that?*

Or that atrociously self-centered brat Angelina from *Angelina Ballerina*? Or the revenge-obsessed Harry Potter? (Remember: the other side is evil!)

A kid could easily grow up confusing heroism with "being the center of attention," or "having fame and money" or, even more scary, "following the crowd"– which, let's face it, is often mindlessly complying with authority.

What these cartoons don't teach kids is that doing things *for the right reason* is more important than being famous, or rich, or powerful. Being heroic means having character, and having character means understanding the difference between good and bad reasons for behavior. For example: You don't eavesdrop. That's not because you might get caught, nor even because certain types of eavesdropping may be against the law. One doesn't eavesdrop because eavesdropping infringes upon the rights of others. You don't snoop on other people *because* you respect them, and at some level, you love them enough not to want to hurt them needlessly. It's called 'civil society'.

Of course, if you're a 'special' person like Angelina Ballerina you don't respect other people. Other people are simply there as a foil to your greatness. Whatever happens to other people is only incidental to *your* story.

No quantity of tutus will hide the fact that Angelina doesn't say 'excuse me' when she bumps into people on the street. (They're just in her way.) No amount of roses will mask the stench of Angelina's relentless sense of entitlement.

And that's the thing about pseudo-heroes. They give themselves away through the details. Perhaps the cruelest thing to do is to hand them a microphone– or a Twitter account– because they will get carried away and show themselves for who they really are. They'll show that even the good things they do are done for the wrong reasons, which is, at best, dispiriting for everyone.

I don't think that we'll ever see "Angelina Ballerina turns 50″, which is a shame, because that cartoon really would be educational. I can

imagine it though: Angelina becomes the Prima Ballerina in Mouseland by sabotaging the competition, all the while believing that she's the persecuted one. There are several failed marriages, substance abuse… oh, wait. The down-hill slope isn't suitable for children, is it? Maybe the up-hill half isn't either.

LEAVE A COMMENT

ITS A SMALL, SMALL WORLD

Close your eyes and think of England.

A friend recently recommended that I read a book on the JFK assassination by Peter Dale Scott, an ex-professor at UC Berkeley. I wasn't far in when I bumped into my old buddy, Clare Boothe Luce.

You may remember Representative Clare from her fling with Roald Dahl– a romp intentionally designed to align her politics more closely with Britain's during WWII. Her book, *Saints for Now* was given a courtesy plug by Ida Coudenhove-Kalergi Goerres in the American version of Ida's Nazi-era book, *The Hidden Face*.

Well, it seems that when Clare wasn't musing on the lives of saints, she was funding an anti-Castro, anti-Kennedy, well-armed, Cuban-exile group called 'DRE' (*Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil*); she subsidized DRE along with her friend William Pawley, who in turn was close to Allen Dulles. (Dulles was one of Bill Stephenson's top men— you know Stephenson, that British spy working in New York. Allen worked for the OSS in Switzerland, then became the first head of the CIA. He was also a director of The Council on Foreign Relations, an organization whose current president, Richard Haas, recently made the news for calling Edward Snowden 'not a whistle-blower'. *Tweet, tweet!*)

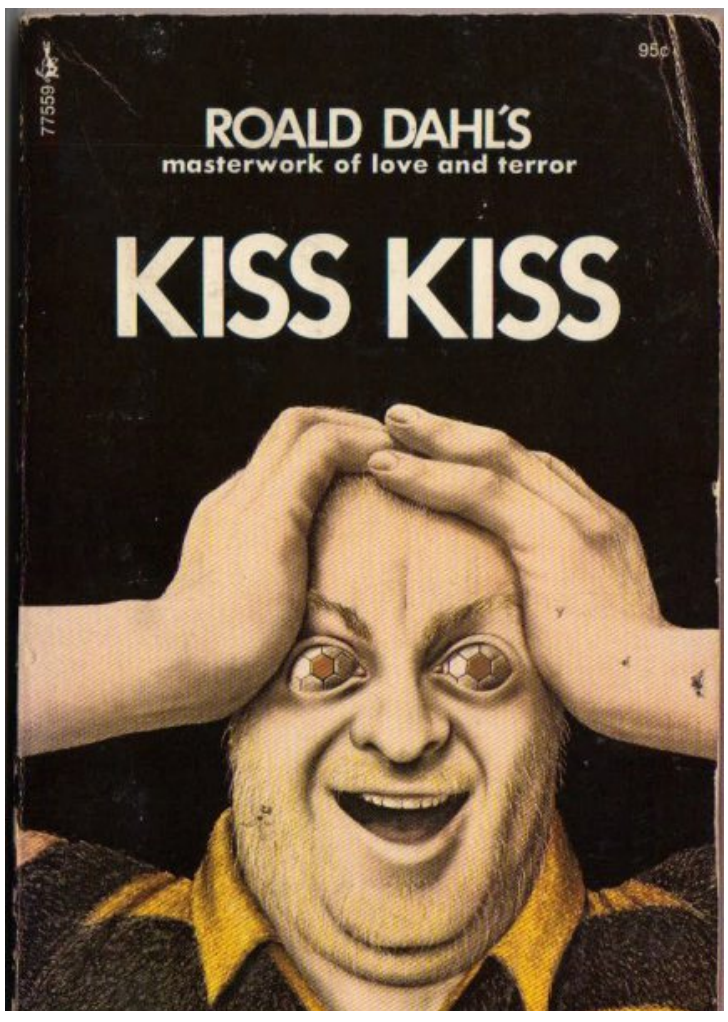
That last factoid makes me laugh, because back when it was cool to like China, the CFR gave Google executives a media platform to spin their cooperation with the Chinese government, which helped Beijing to suppress free speech via the internet. *How'd that one work out for ya?* Buhahaha!

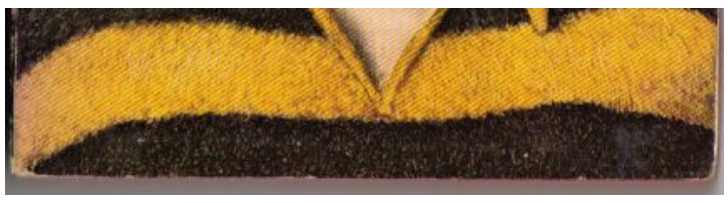
Anywhooo, the first and second oldest professions putter on. I do wonder if, in light of all of Clare's contacts, Dahl's work should be given a different interpretation. Perhaps Willy Wonka isn't selling *candy*. Perhaps there's truth in *Say No to Grandpa Joe*. And maybe all those Oompa-Loompas are really just nutball Cuban exiles. *I'm kidding!*

Prof. Scott sources his info on Clare Boothe Luce from "10 AH 83,85″; which is a reference to the *Hearings of the House Select Committee on Assassinations*, (1979).

LEAVE A COMMENT

MISDIRECTION





Any story with a surprise ending uses misdirection to lead the reader towards one conclusion, then throws another at them. This switch is annoying if it's not done well.

I've written a bit about what poor twists look like, and what good ones look like. Good twists work because that surprise conclusion is a natural one that shows a deeper understanding of the characters than the reader cottoned on to. The 'red herring' conclusion must be natural, the twist conclusion must be natural and smart.

Just goes to show, good stories are rarely written in a night.

I left an important part out of my post on *The Last Act*. The 'red herring' conclusion to this story is that Mrs. Cooper finds fulfillment at work, peace through Dr. Jacobs' treatment and another love with Conrad. That's not what happens. How did Dahl get me to assume the 'red herring' ending would happen?

When you read *The Last Act* twice, you'll see that Dahl drops hints about what's *really* to come (I've written about that before too). These hints are the loci of Dahl's most clever misdirections: the reader is encouraged to interpret these hints in expectation of the 'red herring' ending, when in fact, the hints signal something else. When the twist comes, I'm left thinking: "Oh, yeah, because… *she knew sex wasn't the answer*."

Dahl's favorite tool for misdirection is this: he uses interesting bits of knowledge delivered through the conversation of the lead characters. He employs this tool very simply in *The Last Act*. Conrad talks to Anna about the dangers of gin, menthol and saltpeter– all things Anna consumes through martinis and cigarettes. *Not good for your lady-parts, Anna!*

These little lectures COULD BE interpreted as loving concern. But they are really booby-traps. Juniper oil, menthol and saltpeter are anti-aphrodesiacs; things that will lessen sexual experience. Conrad plants these little mines in Anna's head, and when they come to the act, wow, is she *lacking*.

I was expecting that their union would be something loving; that Anna would find somebody to live for and to look after her again– maybe with the bonus of less 'dependency' in the relationship. Nope!

Reading Conrad's little lectures on menthol, saltpeter and gin was enlightening for me. Dahl has an astounding breadth of interests and knows what a layman will find intriguing. Dahl had a passion for medicine. He also liked gardening and bees, which brings me on to the next story.

Royal Jelly is about a father, Albert Taylor, who saves his starving baby daughter– a daughter which took him nine years to conceive– by putting royal jelly in her formula. Nice story, right?

Superficially, *Royal Jelly* seems to misdirect in a heavy-handed way. There's not much secret about what magic substance will save the little spud. The red-herring conclusion is this: the Baby Girl will be saved by royal jelly, but there will be *some* road-block along the way.

The salvation does happen, but it's an uncomfortable salvation. The results of the treatment are not very clever, IMHO, but they are definitely unexpected, and are reasonably natural, given the fact that papa is described as bee-like half way through the story. The cleverness is in how Dahl misdirects with the suggestion of 'road-blocks'.

Dahl's art– and the reason that his misdirection is not heavy-handed– comes from the 'road-blocks' and where they lead your expectations. For 13 pages, Roald Dahl talks of nothing but bees, their sexual habits, the price of Royal Jelly in New York City, strange Mexican medical experiments with Royal Jelly… a laundry list of interesting tidbits that the author has read about these insects. Tidbits that suggest Royal Jelly will save the daughter by reversing her weight loss *with various consequences*. A few of the tidbits suggest that the jelly may make the girl super-fertile as well, but these come after the wonderful stories of weight-gain.

Dahl then drops a hint about the Taylor's last honey-crop being poor.

As the story progresses Baby Girl does gain weight, but strangely.

> *"… it means in five days a baby weighing seven and a half pounds to start off with would increase in weight to five tons!"*

The child's body swells but her legs stay spindly. Her eyes don't loose that milky, far-away look.

> *"Now isn't that marvelous!" he cried, beaming. "I'll bet she must be almost back to normal already!"*
>
> *"It frightens me, Albert. It's too quick."*

The child's belly develops a layer of fuzz. Clearly, Albert is turning his kid into a bug. Case closed, right?

> *"The reason we had only half the usual crop last summer," he said slowly, lowering his voice, "was because I turned one hundred of my hives over to the production of royal jelly."*

Albert, the living Royal Jelly experiment, the human-drone, has sired a queen. For a year, he's been eating the jelly himself.

I didn't expect the problem to be with Albert, I expected the problem to be a weak baby. I didn't expect Conrad to be a monster, I expected

him to be a blessing.

Half way through *Royal Jelly* we learn that Albert looks like a human bee, but we're encouraged to interpret that fact as a consequence of his love of bees, not because he's been feeding himself jelly. Half-way through *The Last Act* we learn about Conrad, the concerned student of women– a gynecologist, not a misogynist. For each story, 'half-way through' is 10 minutes after we've made our decision about the ending we're expecting.

To a large extent Dahl was self-educated. He had that peculiar breadth of knowledge and wide interests that many self-educated people have. He used this wide knowledge as a tool to manage readers' expectations in all of his writing–– even in his children's books.

Let's recap with examples: There are the facts of the story; the information you need to know so that you don't feel cheated. And then there are the little tidbits like 'saltpeter is in gunpowder and cigarettes' or 'Royal Jelly sells for $480/lbs in NYC', which are actually shinning baubles designed to distract you from the pertinent information, baubles that keep you guessing what will happen. Dahl throws these baubles to the ground like Melanion dropping apples for Atlanta. That's why he's an entertainer.

Finally, it's worth looking at the morals suggested by the two stories. Mrs. Anna Cooper's self-actualization through working backfires. Dr. Jacobs' sex advice doesn't work. Anna's foray into promiscuity is her undoing. Albert Taylor cheats nature and creates (two) monsters.

The Last Act (1966) was written when Roald was 50; *Royal Jelly* (1960) when he was 44. The morals suggested in these stories are very different to the ideas of Dahl's mentors in the 1940s (Charles Marsh and FDR).

In these stories, are we hearing the voice of a young man stamping his foot and saying: "It's your fault I used you!" ? Or are these stories how an aging man chose to run from his conscience? Or are they simply evidence Dahl's changing opinions?

I can't answer those questions, except to say that the last half of Dahl's life was not tranquil.

LEAVE A COMMENT

I don't know Edward Snowden, I can't vouch for his honesty about his motivations. I can't vouch for the honesty of anybody in the media. I've gotten used to judging sources by what they say, because in the end, I can only be sure about what they want me to think.

Does Edward Snowden say anything untrue here? Is anything spun? I can't find anything he says that I don't agree with.

If you're worried about him running to Hong Kong, consider what he says in this interview: "The Hong Kong government is independent in relation to leading Western governments." That's true; the island also benefits from 100 years of old-school British tradition. The type of tradition modern Brits seem to be throwing away. Hong Kong: China's ability to defy the US, paired with *the chance* of old-school British independence and fair play. Snowden is smarter, and better informed, than most observers.

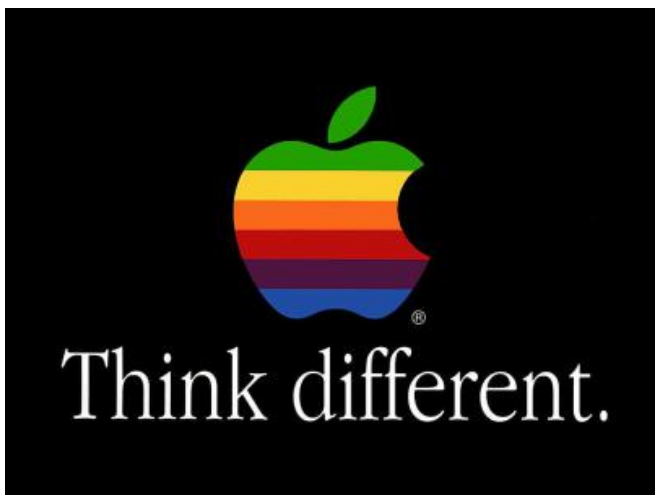
Snowden doesn't just talk about the leaks. He talks about the attitudes of people who are complicit with NSA abuses; he talks about the rule of policy rather than law; he talks about the dangers of public complacency.

Listen to the video yourself. Is this an unreasonable person, a traitor or an "extremist"? Or does he say things that make a dangerous amount of sense?

Maybe, every so often, a hero does come along.

LEAVE A COMMENT

AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES



What?! Even you!

I was eleven years old, just starting secondary school, when I first noticed a special type of behavior that I didn't, and still don't, like.

At my old school, there were certain unspoken rules. Chief among them was don't tattle-tale unless the other kids were doing something *really* dangerous. Nobody wanted to play with kids who broke this rule. And in general, teachers didn't respond well to children who chose to suck-up at other kids' expense. There was a healthy respect for intelligent rules, but most kids and teachers didn't see value in making rules where none were needed, nor did they see value in shit-stirring. But all that was in a far-flung corner of the old Empire.

Then I moved to Britain proper. I started at my new school, and within the first week it was clear that the old rules no longer applied. Tattletales were everywhere, telling on each other for the flimsiest of reasons. Somebody's already gone to the bathroom once today. Somebody else was painting with blue instead of green. Even more sinisterly: "Mrs. Jones, so-and-so says harps are Irish, but really they're from Wales, right?"

To be fair to the kids, they were just starting out in a very new environment with different expectations, etc. But this behavior didn't really improve over time, it just changed. As the kids got older, the tattle-telling was motivated less by the simple desire to curry favor, but because the teller wanted something in particular, like a specific part in a play or to be made prefect.

More shocking than the snitches was how well the new teachers responded to their creepy behavior. The teachers loved it– I can't think of a single teacher who *didn't*. The kids told on each other because it worked. At the time, my default attitude was 'respect teachers', so it was difficult for me to understand why adults responded so well to this manipulative behavior.

For a long while, I reasoned this way: people get older and they start to realize it's sometimes easier to get things through indirection. If I'd stayed on at my old school, kids might have acted the same way once they reached their teens. There's nothing special about Britain, and God knows, there are plenty of sycophants everywhere.

Then I met someone who compelled me to change my reasoning. This man recently retired from a British government body which serves a purpose similar to the FBI: they watch citizens for signs of crime. He told me that in Britain today, there were far, far more 'snitches' per capita than at any time in the USSR or in East Germany under the Stasi.

What's more, these British snitches weren't being paid or cultivated, they *volunteered* information on their neighbors under their own volition. Snitches offered (and his department held on to) even the most trivial tidbits. He described the snitch-situation as "an embarrassment of riches".

Was Britain always a nation of tattletales? I certainly can't say, but I find it interesting that the grizzled, veteran teachers in the Colonies had such a different attitude to their soft-handed colleagues in the home counties.

These days, many Brits seem comfortable with security cameras everywhere, etc. Most of Asia has the same attitude, as do many people from the Metropolitan zones along the US Eastern Seaboard. So, it's not just Britain, though from my experience, they seem to be leading the trend towards a culture of snitchery.

This problem is not one that ends at national borders. I believe that certain professions– or I should say, 'work environments'– encourage tattletales *strictly within their ranks*. I'm talking about the big bureaucracies: Government, Education, Finance, the Military, huge corporations. These places are *embarrassingly rich* with individuals who will step on the rights of others for their own advancement.

I think you see where I'm going.

Whether you love Edward Snowden, hate Edward Snowden or are just secretly jealous of him, its difficult to see how shining light on companies like Microsoft, Google, Facebook, as well as scary organizations like the NSA, benefits the usual suspects. A lot of money has been spent making these *firms* look trustworthy and independent, though I don't believe that smart people ever really thought these firms were trustworthy or independent. I eagerly wait to see how the Prism fiasco gets spun in the aforementioned companies' favor.

If you're wondering where the Russians are in all this, they've just got round to pulling their pants up. And the American newspapers? Shout out to NYT, WaPo, WSJ, etc.: *how you doin'?*

The **really important** thing here is how everyday people respond now that the 400 lbs gorilla has been outed. Do they close their Amazon AND Facebook accounts? Do they stop having conversations on Twitter? (Because really, are tweets any safer than status updates?)

From what I can gather, the 'chic' response is this: "Well, yeah, I always thought these firms were potentially fishy, but what is the NSA going to do with my Facebook information? I don't have anything to hide and, actually, I'm a boring person."

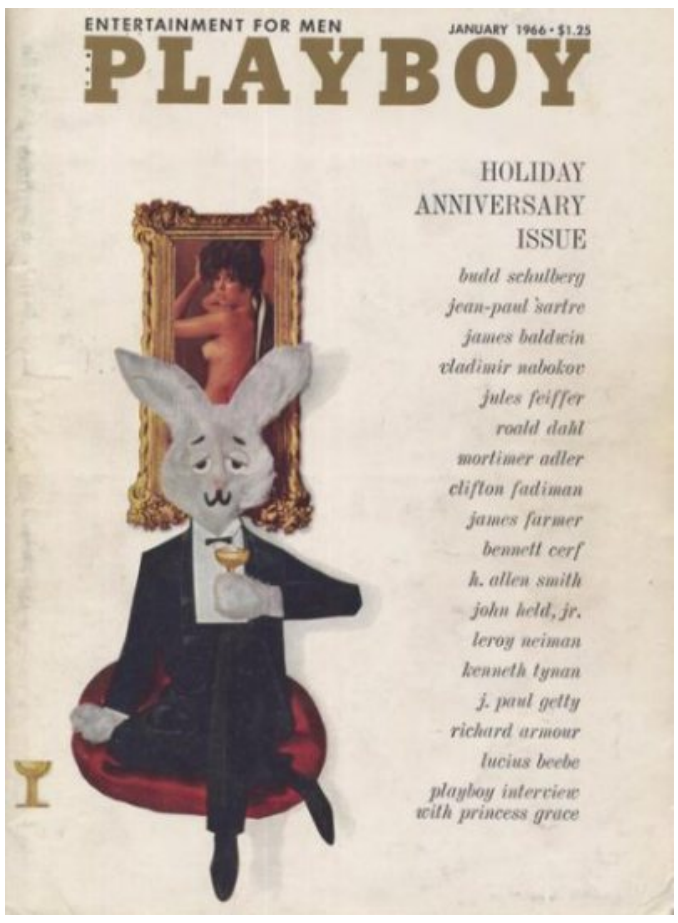
And that may be a perfectly fine attitude, assuming you'll have the chance to take the NSA to court for however they choose to abuse your rights. But lots of things in life don't make it to trial, they just happen, and are a *fait accompli* before a lawyer even gets a sniff.

I also believe that John Doe's attitude shows dangerous ignorance of tattletales. The US government is not stuffed with muppets like Sam the Eagle. The person who decides what's important about you, and what to do with your information, is probably like the little girl who asked about harps. And according to Mrs. Jones, harps are Welsh, dammit. Now get back in queue.

BTW, if you hate Edward Snowden, how do you feel about the IRS?

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE LAST ACT



I had an idea for a Dahl-type story last week. Two protagonists; one an up-and-coming aide to a congressman, the other a Cambridge book-store owner. The aide has a criminal record because he damaged the book store during a protest in college, so in order to get a security clearance, he needs to ask the owner to make a statement on his behalf. The damage happened ten years ago and the aftermath was bitter, but, if he wants the promotion he has no option but to appeal to the store-owner's better nature, etc. Things don't work out as the aide plans.

I felt that this was good material to flex some Dahl-type muscles on, so after several months' hiatus, I started reading my Dahl omnibus again. There are three stories that might help me: *Taste*, *The Landlady* and *The Last Act*.

You may not have heard of *The Last Act*, it's one of the few really mean-spirited stories that Dahl wrote, but I think that it is also as close as you're going to get to the real Dahl– that is, Dahl not hiding his nature while entertaining. *The Last Act* was one of his *Playboy* stories, which surprised me, because although sex is a central theme, there's nothing sexy about this short story. It's morbid and supremely sad. I think that a man could only find it sexy if he hated women– or at least was very, very angry at a woman– but even then the story's not really a turn-on, but maybe some sort of emotional release, like a snuff-film.

So although I first read *The Last Act*– wow- a year ago now, I wasn't in any hurry to analyze it because it's complicated. I feel slightly more able to dissect it now, so here goes.

First, it's written like third-hand gossip, delivered from a polished, attractive (there you go!) speaker. You can almost hear Bill Stephenson's scandal-machine cranking. Dahl is delivering the goods on a juicy suicide.

The story is cinematic- we are given brief, evocative place descriptions every time the scene changes, and as this is a short story, the scene only changes twice.

There are two characters. Mrs. Anna Cooper and Conrad Kreuger. Conrad comes in half-way through; the first half of the story tells us about Anna's emotional state. At first, I thought that it was daring to bring Conrad in so late, but on reflection, it's necessary to keep the twist twisty. You see, up until the end, you'll think that *The Last Act* is a story about how a co-dependent widow finds herself through working and psychotherapy.

Of course, these elements aren't enough to explain this story's momentum. The momentum comes from emotional manipulation; Dahl, even better than Arthur Machen, was a sublime manipulator. (It's worth bearing in mind that he was also a nasty person in real life.)

Dahl keeps the first half of the story going by dropping one bomb after another. It's devastating:

1) Anna suddenly looses a husband who she is not only very happy

with, but also needs. A year later she's not ready to move on when everyone else thinks she should be. She's suicidal.

2) Her children leave the nest. She manages to hide her loneliness from them, but feels increasingly isolated.

3) In order to distract herself from her problems, she gets a job at an orphanage, working with single mothers who are giving up their babies under stressed circumstances. (Could it ever be any other way?) Her job involves dealing with coarse lawyers and adoptive mothers who decide they don't want the children anymore.

Now, if I was 20, these things might roll off my back pretty easily, at least I wouldn't understand them as I do now. So for anybody reading this post who *didn't* get a knot in their stomach over that list, believe me, these aren't just 'unpleasant', they're monstrous, twisted things. Things that no sane person would wish on their worst enemy. So by page fourteen, I was very ready for something good to happen. BTW, Dahl was 50 when he wrote this story, ten years older than both protagonists.

His genius is in the way Dahl delivers these bombs:

> *The policeman who was speaking produced the crocodile wallet she had given Ed on their twentieth wedding anniversary, two years back, and as she reached out to take it, she found herself wondering whether it might not still be warm from having been close to her husband's chest only a short while ago.*

And…

> *It is an awful feeling, after twenty-three years of boisterous, busy, magical family life, to come down alone to breakfast in the mornings, to sit there in silence with a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, and to wonder what you are going to do with the day ahead.*

…

> *And there were girls in the waiting room, young girls with ashen stony faces, and it became part of her duty to type their answers on an official form.*
>
> *"The father's name?"*
>
> *"Don't know."*
>
> *"You've no idea?"*
>
> *"What's the father's name got to do with it?"*
>
> *"My dear, if the father is known, then his consent has to be obtained as well as yours before the child can be offered for adoption."*
>
> *"The father isn't known, don't worry."*

…

> *Now, five months after the move, the wife had written to say that she no longer wanted to keep the child. Her husband, she announced, had died of a heart attach soon after they'd arrived in Texas. She herself had remarried almost at once, and her new husband "found it impossible to adjust to an adopted baby…"*

All these bombs work because good gossip is the type that takes us out of our own worries for a little while, right? Dahl was able to portray these so well because a) he was paid to run a rumor mill in DC and obviously, he was good at knowing what to sell and b) these tragedies closely reflect things that actually happened to Dahl or his wife Patricia. The descriptions are quality, not quantity.

Now, enter Conrad Kreuger from Dallas. The name should give you a hint; Dahl's crude anti-German prejudice landed him in trouble with British military authorities well before he ever joined Stephenson's crew. The Texas angle is more interesting: Dahl's mentor and idol, Charles Marsh, was from Texas, but so were many of Marsh's and FDR's more powerful political opponents. That was in the days before Northeastern politicians like the Bush family, who are from Connecticut, colonized the Lone Star State.

Spoiler alert: Kreuger, a gynecologist, meets up with his old flame Anna while she's on a business trip to Dallas. Kreuger secretly hates Anna for dumping him in high school, and therefore causing every unhappy event in his life: his failed 'rebound' marriage, his ex-wife gaining custody of their child, and his subsequent loneliness. He reads her fragile mental state and deftly manipulates her into committing suicide. End of story.

What's really creepy about Kreuger is his deep understanding of Anna's psychology- maybe it's better to say: Kreuger's understanding of female psychology *in general* is creepy. He knows just what to say to get her to do what he wants, he knows just what to do to knock her off balance: compliments followed by subtle put-downs; repeatedly turning away from her when she is most vulnerable, etc. Dr. Kreuger uses sex to break Anna, and that's what *The Final Act* is about. (Is that what *Playboy* readers are really interested in?) Kreuger is *armed* like a soldier whose job is to cultivate and milk women. Do we know anybody else with that job description?

It doesn't take a lot of insight to see that Kreuger is actually Dahl. Dahl was a notorious womanizer– even after the war– who viewed sex as both work and something dirty. He used it as a tool to get what he wanted at various times in his life, and like a hardened prostitute, he grew to hate his punters.

Where did all this anger come from? It's tempting to look at mama, and in the case of Sofie Magdalene Dahl, there is probably good reason to look at her. Sofie Magdalene was Dahl's father's second wife, the first

being a more glamorous French aristocrat who had died. Sofie felt somewhat insecure in the first wife's shadow; insecure enough to be cruel to her stepchildren and make up a rumor that the first wife died of a botched abortion because she didn't want any more of Dahl's kids. (Shades of what's to come?)

When Elder Dahl died, Roald was the only boy of Sofie's in a household of girls. He was doted on, *endlessly*, and probably stifled by his mother's neediness. When his best friend at school was expelled for sodomizing younger boys, Roald didn't tell Sofie, because he wanted to protect her AND because he assumed that she would think he was in on the sodomy. Not a great relationship, but one he would never really pull himself away from– a situation that led one family member to characterize Great Missenden as "Valley of the Dahls".

Where did this leave Roald? Comfortable with indirection, shaming and lying, or in other words, the more 'feminine' tools for getting people to do what you want. Where Roald was friends with men stronger than himself, say Marsh or Roosevelt or even some of the con-artists he befriended later, he adopted a girlish fawning attitude, something like adoration, and would resist any suggestion that his idols were less than ideal– up to a point. If that point was reached, the two men would part bitterly. Maybe the way Dahl related to other people is why he fit in with the Philby crowd.

Love is close to hate, especially when the love is an unhealthy love, and Roald used his skills dealing with women and flattering men to his best possible advantage. In *The Last Act*, he draws back the veil for us a little, and we can see part of how a very gifted and very troubled author viewed his world. There's something ugly about putting on a mask, and it's possible that being a good entertainer is just the sunny side of being a deceitful, calculating person.

5 COMMENTS

ARTHUR MACHEN

Not just an inferior military intelligence agent.

Arthur Machen was a Welsh ghost story writer, who was active from the 1890s until the 1930s. He enjoyed a wide following and parroted the fashions of his time: naughty in the 1890s; later 'found God'; did a spot of (unintentional?) propaganda work during the Great War; threw a lot of parties in the 20s and was broke in the 30s.

Machen would be unremarkable, except that his stories are quite good. His work has a Gothic-horror feeling to it, but they're not gory, nor do they have soppy romantic elements. What makes them effective is that Machen understood how to play the readers' feelings.

I've noticed the following trends: a Machen story begins with mystery. The lead character finds himself tied to something evil, but the nature of the evil is unclear to both the character and the reader. Machen uses the readers' curiosity and anticipation of being scared as fuel to keep their attention.

The next hook will be something unsettling, whether that's a demon-child, a nanny-witch or a demigod-induced mental illness. Machen knows just how to present these monstrosities in a way that makes your stomach turn. From my own experience: I first found Machen through an audio recording of *The Great God Pan*. My brother and I were listening to it, and when the story came to the brain-surgery part, we both wanted to turn the recording off. I don't remember that ever happening before, especially with a hundred-year old tale. *The Great God Pan* wasn't gory, it wasn't gross, but Machen's descriptions made the event too real. The sickness behind the event was too real.

Machen had a gift for identifying how to push his readers' buttons, which made him a great storyteller and a great manipulator.

Sadly, when dealing with famous 20th-century writers, you'll never be too far away from a psy-op. Machen is most famous for his part in "The Angel of Mons" scandal during WWI. Machen worked as a journalist at the time, and whether intentionally or not, he portrayed a fictional event– angels helping British soldiers fight the Germans– as a true story. The story 'took on a life of its own', with people claiming to have seen the angels, etc.

The most important fact is that Machen's myth caught the attention of Field Marshal Haig's chief intelligence officer, Brigadier General John Charteris. Haig is famous for using concentration camps during the Boer War and managing to kill something like two million British soldiers under his command in WWI. Haig and Charteris were ambitious men who

stopped at nothing, so perhaps no more explanation of "The Angel of Mons" is necessary.

Machen was an expert manipulator, but it would be too hasty to toss him out as just another hack writer. While he does deal with sensational material, there is often a philosophical element too. He explores ideas like the nature of evil in his stories, and does so in a unique and thoughtful way. Machen is one of those rare authors who is both entertaining and enlightening.

It's fashionable to be 'inspired' by Machen these days, with people like Guillermo del Toro and Stephen King claiming him as a muse. If Machen is so widely appreciated, I would expect the quality of these artists' output to be higher. It's like Salman Rushdie claiming *The Master and Margarita* as inspiration for *The Satanic Verses**. Keep hoping, boys. For the honest student of communication, Machen's writing is a useful model for well-executed story structure paired with thoughtful content.

*(Rushdie made this claim to *Newsweek* back in 1990, the same year that Lesley Milne's book was published. She tacked Rushdie's comment in at the end of *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography,* her government-funded obfuscation of Bulgakov's political criticism. Is this just a case of mutual ass-kissing or did the Iranian government have Rushdie pegged?)

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